The Not So Private Lives of Eagles


View from Chippewa Eagle Nest

The other day at a family picnic I was feeling awfully crowded and in bad need of some breathing room. The water being delightful right now, it seemed like a swim might be just the right medicine.

I chose a little lake not far from my home; one I've never before spent time on. I am a distance swimmer, which sounds more impressive than it really is once you understand that floating is half of the talent involved and some bodies float more readily than do others. This delightful little lake is big enough to have a boat access, but small enough that a swimmer doesn't have to spend much time worrying about being run over by motor boats. It's like any number of lakes on the Chippewa National Forest in that it provides a quiet piece of water for anyone to enjoy.

I went for a long, slow swim and was gradually drawn to investigate the sound of eagle chatter. I had actually heard the birds when I pulled into the landing, but could not see them. Being as how eagles generally build their nests in supercanopy pine, the kind of pine that pokes up, above the forest canopy, these birds could see me even though I could not see them. It wasn't until I had swum some distance that I was able to see the nest and the birds sitting beside it in the tree. I am blind as a bat without my glasses, but even at that I could see that the eagles were this year's young because there was no white on them. I wondered why they were chattering so much, until I saw an adult eagle fly into a nearby snag with a fish in its feet. These birds were not scolding me; they were calling for a meal.

Young eagles are generally flying from their nests by late July or early August. Sometimes they are reluctant to leave the nest. Observers have watched parents reduce the amount of food left for their eaglets and fly by with fish to tempt the young birds. Hunger will finally overcome fear, and the eagles will make their first flights.

Like so many raptors and any number of other bird species, young eagles are fed by their parents for a period of time even when it would appear they are well equipped to be feeding themselves. You are familiar with this behavior of fledglings if you have ever seen a group of young crows or blue jays following an adult bird around begging incessantly, despite the obvious ability to fly. During this time, young eagles start to follow their parents on hunting trips.

The behavior of eagles may be less familiar to many of us, but these birds are becoming increasingly available to our eyes. After nearly disappearing from most of the U.S., the bald eagle is now flourishing. Bald eagles have climbed from an all-time low of 417 nesting pairs in 1963 to an estimated new high of nearly 10,000 pairs today. Minnesota tops the list with over 1300 pairs of eagles.

The bald eagle was selected as the national bird in 1782, although it was long treated as far less than a national treasure. During early settlement, the eagle and other birds of prey were generally considered "varmints" because they competed with people for use of fish and game species. Sometimes birds of prey also killed domestic livestock. Birds of prey were often killed on site. In 1917, a 50 cent bounty was established on bald eagles in Alaska. It was increased to $2 in 1949.

In addition, the proliferation of pesticides like DDT following World War II created a poisonous environment for raptors. DDT was passed along the food chain from fish and other organisms to bald eagles. That concentrated the chemicals in their bodies, causing their eggshells to become so thin that routine incubation crushed the shells. The agricultural community needed such pesticides to support crop production.

The publication in 1962 of a book entitled *Silent Spring* by a courageous biologist named Rachel Carson made public years of research across the U.S. and Europe. This information eventually led to a government ban on the use of DDT in 1972. Today, Americans can see wild bald eagles in every state in the lower 48.

In 1962 the Chippewa National Forest hired its first wildlife biologist. One thing that struck John Mathisen when he came to the Chip, was that it had a remarkable number of eagles (40 known nests), despite the fact that there were darn few eagles in the world at this time. John spent a career working to learn more about these birds, developing an effective inventory program, and attracting any number of researchers to the Forest. Although DDT was found in tissue samples and eggs from the Chippewa's eagles, John suspected that wasn't the entire story behind nesting failure of Chippewa eagles. At that time, eagles were known to be extremely wary of human disturbance, and readily left their nest sites when too intruded upon. John suspected that their reaction to disturbance, including that presented by the Chippewa's active timber sale program, was reducing the nesting success. Flight distances were evaluated, and John developed an effective buffer zone program that eventually became a fundamental influence on timing and distance of land management activities around eagle nests.

Today eagles are a common site on the Chippewa. At my home we see them especially in the fall when I am butchering lambs, as eagles find gut piles to be delectable. When hunting in my deer stand, I have seen eagles come soaring in as soon as the first report of a rifle is heard. My farm cats have been harassed more than once by eagles, even while crossing my driveway near the house. What is behind the boldness of these formerly reticent birds? This change is termed 'population habituation'.

Today we see increasing numbers of eagles nesting proximate to human development. It is theorized that as eagle populations increase, and the birds limit their proximity to each other

through territoriality, the progeny are pushed more towards lesser quality sites, and those with higher levels of human activity. If these birds successfully rear their young in this environment, their progeny will have an increased level of tolerance to disturbance than did their parents. The result is a possible eagle habituation to human presence over generations of eagles.

The Chippewa National Forest is currently home to over 200 pairs of nesting eagles. Even with concerns for the effect of the July 2 storm on nesting eagles, this healthy population will have the ability to rebound. With its abundant lakes, clean water, and large pine for nest trees, it provides ideal habitat for our nation's symbol to thrive. Given the rapid lakeshore development happening on private lands throughout the State, the Chippewa's role in providing safe, long-lasting habitat well into our future provides added assurance for the well-being of bald eagles.

The gift of space, be it for birds or people, is one of the lasting gifts of our public lands. Its value only builds over time.

Article Submitted by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
Photo by Rob Salmonson, Timber Sale Administrator and Eagle Tree Climber
Chippewa National Forest

More information on the eagles of the Chippewa is available at the Deer River Ranger Station.